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SUBJECT: GUNS IN THE DESERT: ROOTS OF SAHEL INSTABILITY

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY: The stability of the vast Sahara region of southern Algeria, northern Mali and northern Niger has become a major source of concern to Algerian officials and local leaders we met during a March 23-30 trip to Tamanrasset and Djanet. They tell us a concerted development program and a complex network of managed tribal relationships are responsible for a relative level of calm on the Algerian side of the border. In contrast, they say, traditional Tuareg trade routes across modern state borders mostly to the south of Algeria have been exploited by newly-arrived terrorists to create a market for kidnapping, drugs and smuggling. They blame the deterioration of the security situation on a lack of Malian and Nigerien government control in their northern regions, an absence of economic development, and the destabilizing role of Libya's Muammar Qadhafi, whom they accuse of arming militias throughout the Sahara and of disrespecting Sahel neighbor states by encouraging the vague idea of a Trans-Sahara Republic. With arms, drugs, transportation and communication all quick and easy to come by thanks to improvements in technology and infrastructure, traditional caravan routes have accelerated, making it easier for imported ideologies to prey on fringe elements of Tuareg, Arab, African and other groups that roam the Sahara. Local contacts in southern Algeria told us that no single group is responsible for supporting Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) cells in the region, but noted that AQIM could not survive in the desert without support from local lifelines in the form of food, fuel and arms. END SUMMARY.

FAR, FAR AWAY FROM ALGIERS

12. (S) Algeria's distant, 2,600-kilometer-long southern frontier has been a preoccupation for central planners in Algiers since the country's independence in 1962. Ransom kidnappings, smuggling activities, drug and weapons trafficking and terrorism are modern manifestations of an old problem: how to assert control over a vast territory that is home to several widely dispersed, culturally and linguistically distinct populations, and where smuggling and freedom of movement across borders has been a way of life for centuries. The wilaya of Tamanrasset alone covers 214,750 square miles -- an area slightly larger than France -- but is home to a population of just over 200,000. During our late March visit to Tamanrasset and Djanet, local officials, Tuareg leaders and businessmen shared with us their views on instability in the Sahel, on who is behind the region's various smuggling and kidnapping activities, and on what is being done to keep violence from destabilizing Algeria's South.

SOURCES OF INSTABILITY

13. (S) Abdelkrim Touhami is a retired school teacher who spent nine years in Agadez, Niger, as Algeria's vice-consul. During a March 25 meeting in Tamanrasset, Touhami described the Sahel as a region in which instability flourishes as a result of poverty, weak local government institutions and the absence of government control. The armed conflicts in northern Mali and Niger, he asserted, were direct consequences of underdevelopment that, until resolved, will leave the region exposed to violence and criminal activity. It was in those conditions that the imported Arab terrorists of AQIM took root. Saying that several factors were to blame, Touhami contrasted each Sahelian state's handling of the situation, clearly believing Algeria was on the right track. Prolonged periods of drought in the area have reduced the amount of land suitable for agriculture and herding, he said, meaning fewer traditional sources of income and employment for nomadic Tuareg tribes. A growing influx of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, displaced by drought and conflict, has exacerbated the situation and sent thousands of additional migrants north into Algeria. As the natural gateway to North Africa, Tamanrasset has seen its population swell to over 130,000 from only 1,500 in 1962. Meanwhile, the construction of roads and the use of trucks to transport goods have replaced traditional camel caravans and dramatically accelerated the movement of people. School attendance among nomad children has become more common; however, many of the skills they learn are not suitable for a nomadic lifestyle. Taken together, Touhami said, these trends have made nomadic life impractical.

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"NOT OUR TUAREGS"

14. (S) Touhami's explanation of the link between poverty and instability was a common refrain in many of our meetings in the south. But when asked who or what groups were responsible for recent kidnappings of foreigners in northern Mali, most of our interlocutors blamed imprecise Arab or "Moor" others, insisting that Algerian Tuaregs were not the problem. In Tamanrasset, local Tuareg leader Mokhtar Zounga, founder in 1974 of what is now Tamanrasset's oldest travel agency, explained that Tuaregs defined themselves against others -- more by who they are not than by who they are. Like Berbers, he said, Tuaregs are a jumble of ethnicities, and as such see themselves as "not Arab" and "not Black African." The Tamanrasset-based Amenokal (tribal king) of the Kel Ahaggar Tuaregs, Ahmed Edaber, told us Algeria's Tuaregs have no links to terrorism, explaining that such affiliation "is simply not in our interest." As to the region's smugglers and traffickers, Edaber insisted that these groups are "not our Tuaregs," but rather Arab tribes and criminal networks of sub-Saharan Africans. Tamanrasset's mayor, Ahmed Benmalek (a Tuareg belonging to the Taitok tribe) gave us a similar assessment, blaming sub-Saharan Africans more than any other group: "For centuries the Moors have controlled smuggling in the area. Algerian Tuaregs are not involved."

15. (S) Touhami offered us a more nuanced profile of hostage-takers and smugglers. Vibrant trade routes that rely on bartering continue to thrive in the Sahel, providing economic stability as well as ample opportunities for smuggling contraband. Touhami warned, however, that the assumption that all smugglers have ties to extremist groups is dangerous and misleading. He said that illegal trade is not controlled by any one group, taking his experience in Agadez as an example of an atmosphere in which Tuaregs, Arabs, Cameroonians, Congolese and Chadians smuggled gas, cigarettes and a variety of other contraband. Most smugglers in the Sahara, he noted, were merely economic opportunists: "They know what they are doing is wrong, but they see an opportunity and take advantage of it in order to survive." Touhami added that a smaller, more radicalized subset of the

smuggling trade was responsible for kidnappings, arms smuggling and drug trafficking. These fringe elements, he said, were not drawn from any single group but from a cross-section, with the common theme of using local development problems as political cover for extremist views imported from outside the Sahel. Touhami lamented that recent ransom payments were counter-productive, creating a "market" for future kidnappings and luring more smugglers towards these activities.

AG BAHANGA: LIBYA'S FRANKENSTEIN?

16. (S) Zounga, echoing a theme we heard throughout our trip, painted an unflattering picture of Libya's role in the Sahara. He told us on March 26 that Libya's Qadhafi "has always had a vision" of himself as custodian of an ancient Tuareg homeland spanning the bulk of the Sahara. Zounga said that Qadhafi does not feel he is beholden to any current leader or system of borders, and can simply show up unannounced anywhere in the Sahara for a visit. Looking back at Libya's sporadic 1978-1987 war with Chad, Zounga explained that when Qadhafi realized the war was not going well, he recruited, trained and armed groups of Tuareg tribesmen from other parts of the Sahara. The legacy of the gradual end of the conflict in the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to Zounga, was a militarized Sahara, with armed Tuareg mercenaries "ready for a fight" elsewhere, and who had bought into Qadhafi's irreverence for sovereignty and modern borders. This fueled the initial Tuareg rebellions in northern Mali and Niger in the 1990s. "This is Ibrahim ag Bahanga," he added, referring to the maverick Tuareg rebel leader known to seek refuge in Libya when not fighting the Malian government in northern Mali.

17. (S) Algiers businessman Mohamed Lahreche, who is supervising the construction of two Sonatrach guest villas in downtown Djanet, also said that Libya had been playing an unhelpful role in the region. Lahreche told us that security at the Libyan border -- just 80 km away -- was relatively permissive, and that smugglers had no trouble moving cigarettes, fuel, drugs and people across the desert. Sidi Abdelkader, a Djanet hotel manager, confirmed that many local

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tour guides turn to smuggling in the off-season, which generally runs from May to November. Abdelkader and Lahreche both agreed that there was "no need" for smugglers and Tuareg opportunists to trade in arms, since "weapons came in for free from Libya." Lahreche said that a fragmented Tuareg population, a lack of discipline, and traditional smuggling patterns all made for fertile ground for Libya to cultivate. Qadhafi, said Abdelkader, "is inciting the Tuaregs towards autonomy."

UNCOOPERATIVE NEIGHBORS

18. (S) MFA Director General for African Affairs Lounes Magramane told us on May 3 that Algeria was increasingly frustrated with Malian handling of Sahel security, and with Malian President Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT) in particular. Magramane said that Malian territory had become "a source of concern," and was turning into a sanctuary for terrorists. Whether kidnappings occurred in Niger, Tunisia or anywhere else in the area, Magramane said, "they always seem to end up in Mali." He went on to say that he thought ATT and his government had the capacity but lacked the will to launch the necessary sensitivity and outreach campaign to the tribes of northern Mali. This, Magramane said, was the only way to create the critical tribal relationships that contribute to border security and reduce the temptation to cooperate with bandits and terrorists.

19. (S) Touhami suggested the international community could help by urging officials in Mali and Niger to start listening

to Algeria. He said that from his experience working in Agadez, Niger generally refused cooperation and avoided asking Algeria for help in managing the Tuareg unrest in the northern part of the country. Magramane told us that Algeria was looking forward to the postponed Bamako summit of Sahelian heads of state, upon which Algeria was "hanging a lot of hope." He said Algeria was prepared to offer a wide range of assistance, including joint patrols and operations in the border regions.

ONE SOLUTION: THE ALGERIAN APPROACH

¶10. (S) Touhami said Algeria's efforts to bring stability to the region have been underway since 1962. The key to neutralizing the cycle of violence in northern Mali and Niger, he believed, is grass roots development. Touhami argued that the development process needs to be consultative in order to succeed. "Governments need to ask the people in these regions what they need to improve their lives and then develop a growth strategy around those objectives," he explained. Touhami believed Algeria's experience in this regard is relevant and could be a bridge for dialogue, but that Algeria "can't do it alone." Tamanrasset Mayor Ahmed Benmalek added that the Algerian side of the border is "well controlled," with helicopter, airplane and 4X4 patrols, as well as surveillance technology. The same, he said, could not be said of the Malian and Nigerien sides.

¶11. (S) Unlike the situation in neighboring regions across the border described by Touhami, we were struck by the overwhelming presence of state institutions in the Algerian South. Tamanrasset appeared to be overtaken with infrastructure projects, employing crews of Chinese workers on round-the-clock shifts to build roads and a USD 2 billion project to construct a 750-kilometer water pipeline from In Salah to Tamanrasset. The Ministry of Education recently completed the construction of a university campus in Tamanrasset and construction has begun on a cultural library to honor the region's Tuareg traditions. Tuareg tour guide Mohamed Zounga, Mokhtar's son, told us that support in Tamanrasset for the government in Algiers and for the flagship National Liberation Front (FLN) was almost absolute. "Why should we complain," he asked, citing the university, the water pipeline and the Tuareg library project, "when everytime we ask for something, we get it?"

¶12. (S) French expat and longtime Tamanrasset resident Nicolas Loisillon told us that the relative security on the Algerian side of the border was due to Algeria's effective management of tribal relations among the Kel Ahaggar Tuareg tribes around Tamanrasset, and among the Kel Ajjer Tuaregs based around Djanet and Illizi. The wali (governor) of Tamanrasset is from Algiers, while the mayor is a local Tuareg. Amenokal Ahmed Edaber is also a member of the lower

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house of the national parliament in Algiers (1,600 km to the north), and the central government intervened during the tribal succession deliberations following the death of Amenokal Moussa ag Akhamoukh in 2005. Akhamoukh's son, Mohamed Akhamoukh, asserted his right to succeed his father instead of Edaber, Akhamoukh's nephew. Edaber was the government's choice, and when the tensions threatened to disrupt the local calm, the Algerian government made Mohamed Akhamoukh a senator in Algiers, ensuring that both factions were placated with political spoils.

¶13. (S) Edaber said that although Tuareg unity had been fractured by several decades of modern borders transecting the Sahara, he still uses his contacts to assist the Algerian security services. With a satellite phone, he can disseminate a message asking for information on stolen vehicles, smugglers' caravans, or kidnappers, and receive answers almost instantly, along with reports of security incidents in isolated regions of the Algerian desert. Local

Tuareg leader Mokhtar Zounga said that satellite communications had merely accelerated the traditional mode of communication across the vast desert. "If a child is born in Niger today," Zounga told us, "I will know about it tomorrow." Edaber made it clear to us that the Algerian authorities rely on this traditional Tuareg information network to reach out into the desert and help secure the border regions. He said that although modern borders make it difficult for him to reach out to Tuareg leaders in Mali and Niger, he has "their phone numbers" and is trying to communicate more aggressively with them, with the encouragement of the Algerian security services.

COMMENT

¶14. (S) The modern battle for control of the Sahara has heated up in recent years, with movements of people, weapons and contraband accelerated by Toyota land cruisers and improvements in technology and infrastructure. Several decades of post-colonial borders have broken Tuareg unity, creating tension between individual state security efforts and those such as Libya's Qadhafi who appeal to a glorified nomadic past. Trade routes traditionally controlled by Tuareg tribes, including inventoried merchandise and documented passage, are now up for grabs to a constellation of Tuareg, Arab, African and other groups who continue the commercial tradition as smugglers. Millions of euros in known ransom payments, free weapons and new infrastructure projects have created a market in which desert tribesmen are encouraged to take hostages and increase drug and other traffic, offering the spoils to the highest bidder. According to our contacts, the tiny AQIM cells that have taken up residence in the desert would not survive if the smugglers who act as their umbilical cord saw greater opportunity elsewhere. Among the groups roaming the Sahara, Algeria has placed its bet for security on the Tuaregs, relying on a combination of economic development and carefully managed relationships with key tribal figures. While difficult to translate to neighboring countries with different ethnic, security and economic situations, this approach does appear to have brought relative stability to the Algerian Sahara. Above all, said Zounga, what the region does not need "is more guns."

PEARCE